

increasing speed to the conclusion that today war is no longer an apt means for solving any of the world's problems. The convergence of this 'practical pacifism' with the older pacifist tradition is another feature of the modern world which our discussion must take account of. Perhaps a new stage in the development of Christian thinking about war will be reached as a result.

Finally, the Church must exercise its prophetic role in discerning the signs of the times, and speaking openly and decisively about them. The experience of the early 1980's 'Peace Pastorals' was ambiguous here, not only because so many of them produced either platitudes or self-contradictory propositions, but also because of the uncertain theological roles played by the national conferences of bishops that produced them. Nevertheless, they did constitute a distinct and significant contribution to the Church's mission to address the great international issues of the day, and laid a foundation on which to build. Let us hope that in the future the results are less like the Tower of Babel and more like a Cathedral of Peace.

## George Steiner and the Theology of Culture

Graham Ward

In 1990 George Steiner was invited to give the Gifford lectures at Glasgow University. They were well received. In fact, in Donald MacKinnon's words, they were 'an outstanding series'. They are as yet unpublished. While we still await their publication, the paperback version of *Real Presences*, his most outstanding explication so far of a theology of culture, has appeared. Furthermore, in 1993 John Hopkins University Press are publishing, under the editorship of Nathan Scott, a collection of essays on various aspects of George Steiner's work. This article attempts to assess the preoccupation with theological issues evident in Steiner's work from the beginning.

That culture and its meaning are underwritten by God is a thesis with a long history in literary studies. From the Greeks to Proust, from

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the Torah to Thomas Mann, the argument that the great artist is 'inspired' and communicates that which transcends both himself/herself and his/her public is an ancient one. When George Steiner began defending this argument (in opposition to the formalism of New Criticism in the States) in the late Fifties and early Sixties, he might appear therefore as a late believer in the traditions of liberal humanism. He could be seen as a man ascending a path into the mountains well-trodden before him by the likes of Coleridge, Ruskin, Arnold and T.S.Eliot. Aware, from his examination of the work of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky of 'genius [who] had fallen into the hands of the living God' (T.D. p.44), he began by exploring the frontiers of language. In 1961 we find him writing about 'the retreat of the word' in contemporary culture in an essay with that title. Silence threatens, he prophesies. But it is the silence of the meaningless, the illiterate; the silence of ossified cliché. In the early Sixties we find him preoccupied with this silence and countering it with another form of silence—the silence of the Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* of Dante's *Paradiso*—where language arches back towards its origin, 'where the word of the poet ceases, [and] a great light begins' (L.S. p.59). In 1966, in the remarkable essay 'Silence and the Poet' Steiner goes on to make the claim that here at the frontiers of language is 'proof of a transcendent presence in the fabric of the world. . . [W]e experience the certitude of a divine meaning surpassing and enfolding ours. What lies beyond man's word is eloquent of God' (L.S.p.58).

Now, though this may sound like liberal humanism, albeit in a positivistic garb (with words like 'proof' and 'certitude'), at the same time, in a 1966 essay on Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, Steiner brings together and relates these two forms of silence. One does not annihilate, but lives within the other - as a tension that constitutes an astonishing paradox. It is a tragic paradox in which is glimpsed 'the metaphysical scandal which springs from the fact that the categories of God are not parallel or commensurate to those of man' (L.S.p.159). Silence can either be divine plenitude or empty syllables. The conclusion to *After Babel* puts this succinctly: at the frontiers of language words either 'have re-entered the translucency of the primal, lost speech shared by God and Adam' or 'will "become only themselves, and as dead stones in our mouths"' (A.B.p.474). This is not a reiteration of 'the imagined garden of liberal culture' (I.B.C. p.14). The mandarins have declined and barbarians have stormed the promise land. It is this, then, a highly qualified theology of culture that Steiner develops in the work that follows.

Steiner began to situate himself, in the Sixties and early Seventies,

between two positions. The first perceives an attrition of meaningfulness—the withdrawal of words from any reference to an external world to which they are a response. Steiner traces this tendency back to Mallarmé and Rimbaud. Such a withdrawal, Steiner argues, has had and will continue to have moral consequences evidenced already in the antihumanism, the inhumanity that created Auschwitz. What alarms Steiner is that this position not only continues, it flourishes, particularly in those areas where Steiner has set up his own shop—literary criticism and cultural analysis. The second position perceives the ‘Word’s presence in the word’ (A. p.231) and, therefore, a certain sacramentalism which is intrinsic to language and most especially evident in literary creations (and, by extension, all serious art).<sup>2</sup> This is Steiner’s espousal of what has been termed since the late 1920s ‘logocentrism’. That is, the belief that all signification (whether linguistic or otherwise) is embraced within ‘a single curve of meaning’ (A.B. p.436). Language operates with a transcendental horizon, for this ‘*logos*, this act and essence of God is, in the last analysis, total communication (L.S. p.56). This transcendental meaningfulness guarantees language’s ability to communicate and to be understood, it ontologically relates the speaker, the speech and the one being spoken to.

The tension of being situated between these two antithetical positions—one nihilistic and the other theological—gives rise to what is most ambivalent in George Steiner’s later work. But the ambivalence is calculated and constitutive. From ‘Critic/Reader’ (1979) onwards, the frontiers of language do not offer ‘proof’ or ‘certitude of the divine presence, the reader ‘reads as if. . .the singular presence of the life of meaning in the text and work of art was a “real presence”’ (S.R. p.85). ‘The contact with transcendence cannot be empirically validated’ (S.R. p.96). From 1979 Steiner has argued for a Pascalian wager in which the conviction of divine truth is held under what Donald MacKinnon once called a ‘very healthy agnosticism’<sup>3</sup>. And so, only obliquely does Steiner refer to the Johannine Word made flesh (through metaphors of the sacrament, the annunciation and Easter Sunday). Only obliquely is he implying his work is significant for understanding the Jewish Word of the Lord (through metaphors of priesthood, prophecy and epiphany). The question which forms the subtitle to *Real Presences—Is there anything in what we say?*—remains a question. And the main title of this latest book alludes not simply to a sacramental ‘presence’, but to a plurality of ‘real presences’.

It is in Steiner’s previous book *Antigones* (1984) that contrasting meanings of presence begin to emerge. In ‘Critic/Reader’ the

ontological idiom is distinctly Catholic and sacramental and Steiner employs terms like 'transubstantial', 'real presence', 'sacramental', 'incarnation', 'icon' and 'revelation'. He had been working concurrently on his monograph *Heidegger* and reading, one suspects, von Balthasar (the influence of whose *Mysterium Paschale* can be traced in those final paragraphs of *Real Presences*). But in *Antigones* Steiner returns to the agonistics of tragedy and darker, more sceptical shadows are cast over the writing. Tragedy 'confronts the possibility of nothingness. . . which western religiosity, metaphysical idealism and the common pulse of the imagination would deny' (A. p.281). The meaning and tone of 'presence' shifts throughout. There is 'significant presence' or 'felt meaning'—where a text accords with our own intuition of the human condition. There is 'vestigial presences' which is the approach or the bequest of the holy (a holiness which is sometimes described as a Johannine incarnation and sometimes as a Pascalian otherness). And there is 'presence' as the encounter with the chthonic night, where 'the living wait in blackness for their end' (A. p.288). Presentness can be, therefore, an anthropological, a theological or a purely rhetorical creation. We peer over here into the pluralized 'presences' of Steiner's most recent book.

What began for Steiner as a defensive growling against formalism and the secularity of the culture industry in the early 60s and 70s has more of an offensive bite in this latest book. The objects of his attack remain the same, only the formalism is now that of post-structural and deconstructive criticism. But the jaws of this bite lack teeth and Steiner is aware that to some extent he is playing with a paper tiger. In the first two sections of *Real Presences* he lunges towards a contest, but the lunging is a gesture because he too is aware that the gamble on transcendence might be 'wholly erroneous' (R.P. p.4)—that the gamble on transcendence remains always and only a gamble. When Steiner's book opens, then, with Nietzsche's assertion that God is dead and that 'This essay argues the reverse' (R.P. p.3), he is not constructing an argument from design, an argument for the existence of God (despite the assertive tone). He is constructing a paradox. *Poiesis*—the creativity of the artist which, by liberal tradition, mirrors the creativity of God—can *either* be 'a rhetorical flourish' or 'a piece of theology' (R.P. p.216). The polemic against postmodernism and deconstruction is shot through with ambivalences, because deconstruction issues from the same preoccupation with language and its interpretation as Steiner's philology and logocentrism. But rather than espousing a universal meaningfulness, deconstruction articulates a real absence in the 'real presence'—and, as Steiner points out, 'there is here an absorbing paradox' (R.P. p.128).

Deconstruction would say that 'presence' is only 'a rhetorical flourish' and '*On its own term and planes of argument. . .the challenge does seem to me irrefutable*' (R.P. p.132).

Only a *wager* on the transcendent is possible; we can only read *as if* the other we encounter in all serious art is not a rhetorical flourish but a 'piece of theology'. But this act of faith is no leap in the dark, no assertion of one's will—Steiner perceives it as an integral aspect of the act of encountering itself. *We do read as if; we do take the gamble*; there is an act of commitment and trust within the very process of encountering. Faith is concomitant with one's conduct, one's response. It is the answer to the call to *respond* that is issued by the meaningful. Steiner tries to describe, rather than argue this, in the final section of *Real Presences*, which is a phenomenological account of being engaged in interpreting one's response to a text, a painting or a musical composition. 'I want to ask whether a hermeneutics and a reflex of valuation—the encounter with meaning. . .—can be made intelligible, can be made answerable to the existential facts, if they do not imply, if they do not contain, a postulate of transcendence' (R.P. p.134).

In the teleological movement of this narrative description towards 'a transcendent dimension (R.P. p.216) six stages are evident.

1 Great art defamiliarizes. In encountering it we encounter an otherness, a sense of that which is not us, not understanding language as we normally use it, not seeing the world as we see it. For Steiner this is a recognition of 'the estrangement of our condition' (R.P. p.138), the 'affront of death' (R.P. p.140).

2 Because of this first stage the aesthetic experience 'entails an ethics' (R.P. p.141), for there is a call to respond, to transcend oneself and embrace that which is other. That act of responding is an act of conversion, for there are shifts of being involved in such aesthetic reception, risks are taken and an individual's freedom is exercised in the choice whether to entertain the strange or deny it access. The approach of the other, in the light of the freedom that it initiates, is seen as a gift. What Rowan Williams, commenting upon Ricoeur, has called 'non-heteronomous revelation'<sup>4</sup>.

3 There is dialogue in that address-addressee relationship, but also a recognition that all disclosure is partial. Here Steiner, heavily indebted to Heidegger's thinking about Being, speaks of the hiddenness-in-revealedness as the paradox of the semantic act. 'We know and do not know. . . However deep the trust and the disclosure, there are things about our visitant we shall never know' (R.P. p.162–3). Because of this meaning cannot be totally grasped, there is always something that remains unaccounted for and this 'unaccountability is the essence of

freedom' (R.P. p.164). Great art, then, provides access to this 'freedom. . . of life itself' (ibid.) which lies in the ability to encounter anew, decide anew, interpret anew.

4 The hermeneutical act not only has this existential aspect. The diachronic experience of the 'now' in reception and response to a serious work of art is counterbalanced by a synchronic axis, the historical and biographical context. This is where Steiner's liberal emphasis upon the philological is heard. Meaning has been shaped by past tradition and its employment by a particular artist, at a particular moment in time, in a particular place. We need to assess these influences in order to make 'accessible to us the incipience of purposed form' (R.P. p.16). It is the 'incipience' itself that Steiner wishes to focus upon, for it has its theological analogue in 'revelation'. In understanding the 'engima of [a work of art's] creation' (R.P. p.4) we 'become privy to the mystery' (R.P. p.17), that birthing of meaning into aesthetic form.

5 When the stranger is entertained then our self-possession is undermined and we are translated (with all that word connotes), for the otherness enters and 'makes us other' (R.P. p.188). We are placed into a relationship with the creative act itself, with 'the energy that is life' (R.P. p.196). And it is at this moment that we arrive at the threshold of Bethel, for this 'energy of existence lies deeper than any biological or psychological determination' (R.P. p.196).

6 This final stage opens with the statement, 'there is formal construction because we have been made form' (R.P.p.201). We return to Steiner's overarching anthropological question, 'What is man?' and to his thesis that language and literature are born of 'an *imitatio*', a replication on [their] own scale of the inaccessible first fiat' (ibid.) Developing themes already evident in those early essays like 'Silence and the Poet', Steiner describes the effect of *poiesis*, where *mimesis* does not simply copy what is given but births a 'counter-creation'. This is the paradox of human creativity which has its origins in, in being a response to, the divine creativity and yet 'rages. . . at being, forever, second to the original' (R.P. p.204). Human creativity, then, embodies a meaning 'within, but also behind presentness and representation' (R.P. p.211). There can be no determinative answer as to where the rhetoric of representation ends and the holiness of a 'real presence' begins. Great art celebrates God as original creator, but it also stands as an autonomous creation, referring to nothing but itself. The icon is also Habakkuk's dumb idol.

Steiner's pursuit of the Word in the flesh of words or pigments or sounds concludes with a paradox, the paradox at the heart of post-Holocaust theology and postmodernist thought: 'The density of God's

absence, the edge of presence in that absence, [which] is no empty dialectical twist' (R.P.p.229). The arguments of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man (Steiner wishes to homogenise their theses) are 'antinomian to philology'. The postmodernist view of language, evident earlier in Wittgenstein, presents a 'fundamental shift from referential to an internally-relational semantics' (R.P. p.105). There is nothing outside the text but ever-widening circles of context. Words refer only to other words, so that reference is continually opening aporias of difference that defers, or displaces meaning. Textuality is all. There is no Word incarnate in the flesh of words or pigments or sounds, there is only the surface play of words with other words, pigments with other pigments, sounds with other sounds. The result is a 'deconstructionist and postmodernist counter-theology of absence' (R.P. p.122). And against this absence Steiner balances his analysis of aesthetic reception. Steiner, following Heidegger and Ricoeur, perceive in this reception and the consequent hermeneutical act an anthropological *a priori*, the endemic awareness of self's finitude and its ineluctable openness to what is other and transcendent. But this does not constitute a proof. This cannot constitute an argument *for* logocentrism. Steiner accepts that there are no grounds here for a natural theology. The analysis of reception and interpretation can only be a counter-weight: 'What I affirm is the intuition that where God's presence is no longer a tenable supposition [as it was in the salad days of romantic, liberal humanism] and where His absence is no longer a felt, indeed overwhelming weight . . . [w]e must read *as if*' (R.P. p.229). His own description of 'reading', of response to the other, does reveal the necessity of believing in 'a single curve of meaning' (A,B, p.436). But the logocentrism of language can only be a Kantian postulate 'answerable to the existential facts', facts which describe the slow turning of the hermeneutical circle.

As I pointed out earlier, the paradox of the theology and counter-theology of language is already evident in the conclusion to Steiner's 1975 work *After Babel*. But the paradox as it is described at the end of *Real Presences* is much more nuanced and complex. Here our present culture is read into the narrative and metaphors of Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday. Ours is 'the long day's journey of the Saturday' (R.P. p.232)—ours the experience of the in-between, the space not reported on between the ultimate violence and the crowning fulfilment. There is no dissolving the paradox, no golden liberal synthesis. Caught between despair and hope, void and plenitude, empty rhetoric and the Word, there can only be a 'wager'. And even though the emphasis is upon 'journeying', and the paradox leaves us not paralysed, Steiner can only speak of emptiness, rupture, tragedy and waste 'in the

*name of hope* (R.P. p.232, my italics). There is even here what he terms earlier in the book 'a self-ironizing alertness to the verbal' (R.P. p.171). It is an irony that surfaces acutely in a profoundly Jewish thinker locating the redemption of culture in a Christian narrative. The questions remain: Is there anything *in* what we say? Where does the eloquence end and the truth begin?

Steiner's analysis of culture has always, then, been deeply theological. He attempts, in the all too personal face of the Shoah, to turn Adorno's statement 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' into a question. He attempts to do this by defining the theological horizon within which art is created and disseminated. His work emphasizes that such an appeal to the theological can only question. Steiner cannot refute Adorno's statement. For words are not the Word and never can be. Steiner wrote of Schoenberg's Moses that, unlike his brother Aaron, he served 'a Deity so intangible to human mimesis' (L.S. p.158). Representation is both necessary, if we are ever to understand the presence of God at all, and yet impossible. 'Words distort; eloquent words distort absolutely' (R.P. p.157). The Word of God, for George Steiner, has to operate in the interstice between no word and every word, silence and eloquence. It is an interstice only traversed by the praxis of reading and responding; by the act of interpreting as a act of faith in the ultimate meaningfulness of what is being interpreted. It is, for George Steiner, an interstice, a 'long day's journey', where music plays and the Sirens sing.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

- T.D. *Tolstoy and Dostoevsky*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1959.)  
L.S. *Language and Silence*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1967.)  
I.B.C. *In Bluebeard's Castle*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1971.)  
A.B. *After Babel*, London: (O.U.P., 1975.)  
G.S. *George Steiner: A Reader*, (London: Penguin, 1984.)  
A. *Antigones*, London: (O.U.P., 1984.)  
R.P. *Real Presences*, London: (Faber and Faber, 1989.)

- 1 New Criticism was a method of literary interpretation practised in America by the likes of Cleanth Brooks and Austin Warren and influenced by the work of I.A.Richards. Its emphasis upon 'close reading' and the form of the text tends to denigrate the historical, philosophical, theological and biographical contexts which within such texts are both written and read.
- 2 The difficulty of defining serious art as distinct from art which purely entertains, the aesthetic as anaesthetic, is one of the main themes of *Real Presences*. As Steiner's comments upon hearing Edith Piaf's 'Je ne regrette rien' testify, distinctions are difficult to make. But not impossible.
- 3 *The Problem of Metaphysics*, (C.U.P., 1974) p.118.
- 4 'Trinity and Revelation', *Modern Theology* 2:3, 1986.